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AUDITOR-CONTROLLER

**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES  
DEPARTMENT OF AUDITOR-CONTROLLER**

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October 27, 2005

TO: Supervisor Gloria Molina, Chair  
Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke  
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky  
Supervisor Don Knabe  
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

FROM: J. Tyler McCauley  
Auditor-Controller 

SUBJECT: **SERENITY FOSTER FAMILY AGENCY CONTRACT REVIEW**

We have completed a contract compliance review of Serenity Foster Family Agency (Serenity or Agency), a Foster Family Agency service provider. The review was conducted by the Auditor-Controller's Countywide Contract Monitoring Division.

**Background**

The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) contracts with Serenity, a private, non-profit, community-based organization to recruit, train, and certify foster care parents for the supervision of children placed in foster care by DCFS. Once the Agency places a child, it is required to monitor the placement until the child is discharged from the program.

Serenity is required to hire qualified social workers to provide case management and act as a liaison between DCFS and foster parents. During our review, Serenity oversaw a total of 88 certified foster homes in which 96 DCFS children were placed. Serenity is located in the Fifth District.

DCFS pays Serenity a negotiated monthly rate, per child placement, established by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) Funding and Rate Bureau. Based on the child's age, Serenity receives between \$1,589 and \$1,865 per month, per child. Out of these amounts, the Agency pays the foster parents between \$624 and \$790 per month, per child. For Fiscal Year 2004-05, DCFS paid Serenity approximately \$1,935,000.

*"To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service"*

### **Purpose/Methodology**

The purpose of the review was to determine whether Serenity was providing the services outlined in their Program Statement and County contract. We also evaluated the Agency's ability to achieve planned staffing levels. Our monitoring visit included verifying whether Serenity received the appropriate reimbursement rate for each child and whether the certified foster parents received their portion of the reimbursement rate in a timely manner. We reviewed certified foster parent files, children's case files, personnel files, and interviewed Serenity staff, the children and the foster parents. We also visited a sample of certified foster homes.

### **Results of Review**

Generally, Serenity provided the services required by the County contract. The foster parents stated that the services they received from the Agency meet their expectations, and the children indicated that they enjoy living with their foster parents. In addition, Serenity maintained the appropriate staffing levels and their social worker caseloads did not exceed the maximum allowed by CDSS Title 22 regulations. Serenity also paid the foster parents their monthly payments in a timely manner.

Serenity needs to improve their oversight of the foster homes to ensure the homes comply with the provisions of Title 22 and the County contract. For three (60%) of the five homes visited, the foster parents did not secure kitchen toxins and detergents. In addition, three (60%) of five homes visited did not have operable smoke detectors in the hallways leading to the children's bedrooms in accordance with the County contract.

Serenity did not obtain criminal record clearances for the staff employed by one foster parent to provide daycare services. Serenity also did not conduct an assessment to evaluate a foster home's capability to effectively care for more than two children prior to placing more than two children in the home.

The details of our review, along with recommendations for corrective action, are attached.

### **Review of Report**

On September 15, 2005, we discussed our report with Serenity who agreed with the findings. In their attached response, Serenity management reported the actions they have taken to implement the recommendations contained in the report. We also notified DCFS of the results of our review.

We thank Serenity for their cooperation and assistance during this review. Please call me if you have any questions, or your staff may contact Don Chadwick at (626) 293-1102.

JTM:MMO:DC

Attachment

c: David E. Janssen, Chief Administrative Officer  
David Sanders, Ph.D., Director, Department of Children and Family Services  
Jennifer Choctaw, Director, Serenity Foster Family Agency  
Colleen Anderson, Community Care Licensing  
Public Information Office  
Audit Committee

**COUNTYWIDE CONTRACT MONITORING DIVISION  
FOSTER FAMILY AGENCY PROGRAM  
FISCAL YEAR 2005-2006  
SERENITY FOSTER FAMILY AGENCY**

**PROGRAM SERVICES**

**Objective**

To determine whether Serenity Foster Family Agency (Serenity or Agency) provided program services in accordance with their County contract and California Department of Social Services (CDSS) Title 22 Regulations.

**Verification**

We visited five of the 88 Los Angeles County certified foster homes that Serenity billed the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) for in September and October 2004 and interviewed the seven foster parents and 14 children. We also reviewed the documentation in the case files for the seven foster parents and 14 children. In addition, we reviewed the Agency's monitoring activity.

**Results**

Generally, Serenity provided the services required in the County contract. The foster parents stated that the services they received from the Agency meet their expectations and the children indicated that they enjoy living with their foster parents. The foster parents were certified and were given appropriate training by Serenity as required by the County contract. Serenity maintains documentation to support the services billed to DCFS. In addition, Serenity provided Comprehensive Quarterly Reports to DCFS in a timely manner.

Although Serenity provided most of the services required by the County contract, the Agency needs to improve their oversight of the foster homes to ensure that the foster homes are complying with all the provisions of Title 22 regulations and the County contract. In addition, Serenity needs to ensure they conduct an assessment to evaluate a foster home's capability to provide quality care for more than two placements prior to placing more than two children in the home. We specifically noted the following:

**Foster Home Visitations**

- For three (60%) of five homes visited, the foster parents did not secure toxins and detergents as required by the County contract. In addition, one of the three homes had unlocked sharp knives in the kitchen cupboard. Subsequent to our review, the Agency provided corrective action plans for the deficiencies.

- Three (60%) of five homes visited did not have operable smoke detectors in accordance with the County contract. For two of the three homes, the smoke detectors in the hallways outside the children's bedrooms were not operable. In the third home, the hallway leading to the children's bedrooms did not contain a smoke detector as required by the County contract. Subsequent to our review, the Agency provided evidence that the three homes had operable smoke detectors in the hallways to the children's bedrooms.

#### Foster Parent Certification

- One (14%) of seven foster parents' file did not contain criminal record clearances for two staff that the foster parent employed at her home daycare center. The foster parent stated that occasionally the children are left alone with the two staff when she leaves to run errands. She also stated that the two employees received clearances from CDSS Community Care Licensing Division. However, at the time of our review, she did not provide copies of the clearances. The County contract requires Serenity obtain a criminal record clearance for any employee of a foster parent that comes in contact with a foster child. Subsequent to our review, Serenity provided proof of criminal record clearance for one of the staff. The criminal record clearance had been completed prior to our review. Serenity staff stated that the second individual no longer worked for the foster parent.
- For one (20%) of five foster homes visited, Serenity did not conduct an assessment to evaluate the foster parent's ability to effectively care for more than two children prior to placing more than two children in the home as required by the County contract.

#### Children's Records

- Two (14%) of 14 children's files did not contain signed copies of the Agency's orientation to its policies and procedures. The County contract requires Serenity to provide each new child a comprehensive overview of the Agency's policies and procedures and have the child or the child's authorized representative sign to acknowledge that their receipt of the policies and procedures and an orientation.

Serenity management needs to ensure that staff adequately monitor foster homes to ensure the homes comply with the County contract requirements and Title 22 regulations. Serenity also needs to obtain criminal record clearances for caregivers of foster children used by foster parents and conduct an assessment to evaluate a foster home's capability to provide quality care for more than two placements prior to placing more than two children in the home. In addition, Serenity needs to ensure that foster children or their authorized representative sign and receive a copy of the Agency's policies and procedures at the end of their orientation as required by the County contract.

**Recommendations****Serenity management:**

1. Ensure that staff adequately monitor foster homes to ensure the foster homes comply with the County contract and Title 22 Regulations.
2. Ensure that criminal record clearances are obtained for caregivers of foster children.
3. Ensure that staff conduct an assessment to evaluate a foster home's capability to provide quality care for more than two placements prior to placing more than two children in the home.
4. Ensure that foster children or their authorized representative sign the Agency's policies and procedures.

**CLIENT VERIFICATION****Objective**

To determine whether the program participants actually received the services that Serenity billed DCFS.

**Verification**

We interviewed 14 children placed in five certified foster homes and seven foster parents to confirm the services Serenity billed to DCFS.

**Results**

The program participants interviewed stated that the services they received from Serenity meet their expectation and their assigned social worker visits them regularly.

**Recommendation**

There are no recommendations for this section.

**STAFFING/CASELOAD LEVELS****Objective**

Determine whether Serenity social workers' case loads did not exceed 15 placements and whether the supervising social worker did not supervise more than six social workers, as required by the County contract and CDSS Title 22 regulations.

**Verification**

We interviewed Serenity's Executive Director and Director of Social Work and reviewed staff's personnel files. We also reviewed caseload statistics and payroll records for September and October 2004.

**Results**

Serenity's eight social workers each maintained an average caseload of 13 cases. In addition, four supervising social workers each supervised an average of two social workers.

**Recommendation**

**There are no recommendations for this section.**

**STAFFING QUALIFICATIONS****Objective**

Determine whether Serenity's staff possessed the education and work experience qualifications required by their County contract and CDSS Title 22 regulations. In addition, determine whether Serenity conducted hiring clearances prior to hiring their staff and provided ongoing training to staff.

**Verification**

We interviewed Serenity's Director of Social Work and reviewed each staff's personnel file for documentation to confirm their education and work experience qualifications, hiring clearances and ongoing training.

**Results**

Serenity's Director of Social Work, supervisors and social workers possessed the required education and work experience required by the County contract and Title 22 regulations. In addition, Serenity completed hiring clearances for staff assigned to the County contract.


**Recommendation**

**There are no recommendations for this section.**

September 14, 2005



To: Supervisor Gloria Molina, Chair  
Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke  
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky  
Supervisor Don Knabe  
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

From: Jennifer J. Choctaw, M.S.   
Executive Director

Regarding: Centralized Contract Monitoring Foster Family Agency Program Fiscal Year  
2004-2005 - Serenity Infant Care Homes, Inc.

This letter is in response to the audit results of Serenity Infant Care Homes, Inc. completed by your office. Serenity is in general agreement with the findings with noted observations.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that staff adequately monitor foster homes to ensure the foster homes comply with the County contract and Title 22 Regulations.

**Corrective Action Plan:** Serenity's social workers are required to see our children four times monthly, with a minimum of two in-home visits. The bi-monthly monitoring of Serenity's certified homes is done by the assigned caseworker, with oversight by a supervising social worker. At the monthly staff in-service trainings, additional emphasis will be placed upon compliance with the County contract and Title 22 regulations, especially in the areas of safety and well-being.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that criminal record clearances are obtained for caregivers of foster children.

**Corrective Action Plan:** Serenity's policy has always been that certified parents, licensed daycare providers, volunteers, staff, have criminal record and child abuse clearances. As a result of the processing delays encountered in transferring the clearances for an assistant to the licensed daycare provider, Serenity has deleted



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**the transfer of clearances process.** The new requirement is that all daycare provider assistants must obtain **new** criminal record clearances. This change in policy will improve the Agency's timely tracking and documenting these clearances.

**Recommendation: Ensure that staff conduct an assessment to evaluate a foster home's capability to provide quality care for more than two placements prior to placing more than two children in the home.**

A Capacity Assessment form has been included in the certified parent office file to ensure that the appropriate documentation of the assessment has been completed and signed off by the Child Placement Unit Director.

**Recommendation: Ensure that foster children or their authorized representative sign the Agency's policies and procedures.**

Although 75% of Serenity's population is between the ages of newborn and 5 years, additional oversight by the Children's Placement Unit and the social work supervisors has been implemented to ensure that Serenity's policies and procedures are signed upon intake by the child, if age appropriate, or his/her authorized representative(certified parent).

Serenity Infant Care Homes, Inc. appreciated the thoroughness with which the audit was conducted, for our goal is to decrease the 2% rate of serious incidents in our foster families. The corrective actions were implemented immediately. If you have additional questions, please call me at (626) 859-6200.

In the Service of Children and Families

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennifer J. Choctaw", written in a cursive style.

Jennifer J. Choctaw, MS  
Executive Director